

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Adolph MENZEL (Breslau 1815 - Berlin 1905)

A Seated, Elegantly Dressed Lady Eating from a Plate

Pen and black ink and grey wash.

Signed and dated Ad. Menzel. 78 at the lower left.

172 x 107 mm. (6 3/4 x 4 1/4 in.)

After completing his series of paintings of events from the life of Frederick the Great and the monumental canvas of *The Coronation of King Wilhelm I at Königsberg*, Adolph Menzel's interest in the history of Prussia was superseded by a new emphasis on the Realism of contemporary life in Berlin and the industrial growth of modern Germany. From the 1870s onwards, the allure of the Prussian court for Menzel was largely limited to the court balls which the artist often attended, mainly, it seems, for the opportunity of drawing the participants. As Menzel himself noted of these events at court, in a letter to his brother-in-law, he was attracted by 'The whirl of people of all races, also of all the super-subtle differences of status and position, taste and non-taste in matters of dress, in the most impressive and the most wretched of human specimens...'

The contemporary French poet Jules Laforgue, writing in 1885 during his time in Berlin as a counsellor to the Empress Augusta, Queen of Prussia, noted of the festivities at the imperial court that 'one sees

the celebrities...[including] the painter Menzel: he is no taller than the boot of a Cuirassier guard and bristles with medals and honours, among them, however, also the légion d'honneur; he turns to the left and right, knows everyone and misses none of these evenings; he moves among all these personalities like a gnome, this enfant terrible of history painters.'

The present sheet can be related to Menzel's genre painting *The Supper at the Ball* (*Das Ballsouper*) of 1878, today in the collection of the Nationalgalerie in Berlin. The painting is arguably the culmination of

Menzel's interest in the events of Prussian courtly life. As a contemporary English journal further described the work, *The Supper at the Ball* 'represents a crowd of fashionable ladies and gentlemen in magnificent costumes and uniforms, grouped around a supper-buffet erected in a long gallery leading from the ballroom, and all occupied in the laudable endeavour to procure something to eat and drink.

The variety of character which this scene reveals is very humorously displayed... But what gives the picture its chief artistic interest is... the curious light in which the scene is set. A myriad of wax-candles, disposed in a large chandelier overhead and in groups against the wall, send forth in 'The Ball Supper' waves of light that really appear like an actual illumination, and fall with astonishing effect on the naked shoulders and shimmering satin dresses of the ladies. The effect, it is said, is immensely enhanced if the picture be seen in a darkened room with a strong light thrown upon it... 'The Ball Supper' has an interest from an historical point of view, for... it is likely to be exceedingly valuable in future ages as revealing so much of the character, manners and costumes of the nineteenth century.'

In an early appreciation of *The Supper at the Ball*, the scholar and museum director Max Jordan wrote of Menzel, 'When he painted the *Ballsouper*, this ingenious mirror-image of Berlin court society, he set to work almost as if he were assembling a mosaic. He had the conception of the whole and of all details so completely in his mind that he could finish off the painting piece by piece.' Indeed, numerous preparatory drawings by Menzel for various figures in the finished painting are known; in the *Kupferstichkabinett* in Berlin, the *Staatliche Graphische Sammlung* in Munich, and elsewhere. Among the drawings in Berlin are two pencil studies related to the present sheet, both of which depict a woman in an identical pose, sipping soup from a small cup and bowl.

While undoubtedly inspired by the painting, however, this fully signed and dated drawing is not actually a preparatory study for any figure in *The Supper at the Ball*, and is instead one of a handful of autonomous pen and ink drawings produced by Menzel in the 1870s and 1880s. These were sometimes made as gifts for friends, or for such art journals as the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, since pen and ink drawings were more suited to printmaking and reproduction than the pencil drawings that Menzel usually prepared his canvases with. Indeed, the present sheet was engraved and reproduced, with the title 'Entre deux danses', in an article by Charles Tardieu published in the French magazine *L'Art*, devoted to German art shown at the *Exposition Universelle* of 1878 in Paris.

As one scholar has written, 'When he drew, Menzel's eye worked rather like the lens of a camera and his small, energetic hand followed it easily, certainly and quickly.' The artist's interest in the anecdotal is particularly evident in this drawing, which depicts a seated, elegant young woman balancing her soup cup and plate in one hand while attempting to sip her soup, leaning forward to avoid spilling any on her fashionable silk dress. It is a scene the artist must have witnessed many times at court balls, and he is likely to have been amused by the contrast between the elegant social setting and the commonplace eating habits of the guests, since it was certainly a prominent motif of the larger painting of *The Supper at the Ball*. As has been noted of the court balls, 'Menzel the observer found a whole range of subjects there which enriched his portrayals of city life. It is not without discreet irony that he... depicted the difficulties of eating food in the most uncomfortable positions.'

Ink drawings are relatively rare in Menzel's oeuvre. Among stylistically comparable drawings by the artist is a study of a young woman visiting the so-called Tomb of Juliet in Verona, dated 15 September 1881, which appeared at auction in Germany in 2012.

Literature:

Charles Tardieu, 'La Peinture a l'Exposition universelle de 1878: L'École allemande', *L'Art*, 1879, illustrated p.87 (as 'Entre deux danses').

Artist description:

Adolph Friedrich Erdmann von Menzel began his career working in his father's lithography shop in Breslau (now Wrocław in Poland) and later in Berlin, where his family moved in 1830. A brief period of study at the Akademie der Künste in Berlin in 1833 seems to have been the sum total of his formal training, and he is thought to have taught himself how to paint. At the outset of his career he worked as an illustrator, his activity in this field perhaps best exemplified by a series of some four hundred designs for wood engravings produced to accompany Franz Kugler's *History of Frederick the Great*, published in instalments between 1840 and 1842. During the late 1840's and 1850's he was occupied mainly with a cycle of history paintings illustrating the life of Frederick the Great.

In 1861 Menzel received his most important official commission, a painting of *The Coronation of King William I at Königsberg*, on which he worked for four years. In the following decade, his lifelong interest in scenes of contemporary life culminated in what is arguably his masterpiece as a painter; the large canvas of *The Iron Rolling Mill*, painted between 1872 and 1875 and immediately purchased by the National-Galerie in Berlin. The last three decades of his career saw Menzel firmly established as one of the leading artists in Germany, a prominent figure in Prussian society and the recipient of numerous honours including, in 1898, elevation to the nobility. In the late 1880's he began to abandon painting in oils in favour of gouaches, although old age meant that these in turn were given up around the turn of the century. Yet he never stopped drawing in pencil and chalk, able always to find expression for his keen powers of observation. A retrospective exhibition of Menzel's work, held at the National-Galerie in Berlin a few weeks after the artist's death in 1905, included more than 6,400 drawings and almost 300 watercolours, together with 129 paintings and 250 prints.

A passionate and supremely gifted draughtsman, Menzel was equally adept at watercolour, pastel, gouache and chalk. He was also able to draw with either hand, although he seems to have favoured his left. An immensely prolific artist (over four thousand drawings by him, together with 77 sketchbooks, are in the collection of the Nationalgalerie in Berlin alone), it is said that Menzel was never without a sketchbook or two in his pocket. His friend Paul Meyerheim described the artist's appearance: 'In his overcoat he had eight pockets, which were partially filled with sketchbooks, and he could not comprehend that there are artists who make the smallest outings without having a sketchbook in their pocket...an especially large pocket was installed...to hold a leather case, which held a pad, a coupe of shading stumps and a gum eraser.' Menzel was widely admired as a draughtsman by his contemporaries, both in Germany and abroad, and Edgar Degas, for one, is known to have owned at least one drawing by him.